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ABSTRACT

One method of dramatizing the constant state of crisis management in developing countries is to have students in introductory college comparative political science classes study India's political system, which is under stress because of regional, linguistic, and cultural pluralism. This paper, a result of the 1987 Fulbright Summer Seminar to India, investigated the 1975 Indian State of Emergency as a case study to identify key political concepts and to analyze political problems. Core problems for developing nations are identified as: (1) creating a common identity; (2) creating effective instruments of power; (3) developing governmental legitimacy; and (4) fostering economic development. The Indian State of Emergency is identified as an outgrowth of failure to solve core problems, and the results of democratization and authoritarianism used during the crisis are compared. Various political, social, and religious perspectives on the crisis are identified and discussed. References are included. (JHP)

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TEACHING THE INDIAN EMERGENCY AS A CASE STUDY IN INTRODUCTORY COMPARATIVE POLITICS

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Teaching the Indian Emergency as a Case Study in Introductory Comparative Politics

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One of the common difficulties in teaching students about the governance problems of developing nations is the stark contrast between the relative stability and acceptance of democratic principles characteristic of our own country and the instability and authoritarianism so common in the Third World (and given continuous coverage by the Western press). To students studying foreign governments for the first time, U.S. sectional strife and the near breakdown of our political system during the civil war are distant memories.

One way I have found to dramatize the almost constant state of crisis management in Third World countries is to have my students study the Indian political system, one which is under inordinate stress due to the immense regional, linguistic, and cultural pluralism which is its hallmark. Particularly we focus on a case study of the so called Emergency of the mid-1970s because it illustrates so many governance problems and provides an opportunity to discuss an array of explanations for why democracy breaks down.

This problem is surely an important one in the study of politics. In Latin America we have seen a cycle of democratic regimes succumbing to authoritarian rule and then returning to democratic procedures. The Iberian peninsula has recently seen a transition to democracy, as has the Philippines. South Korea appears to be gradually democratizing. But the question remains how deep and substantial these changes really are. Political scientists have found that "political decay" is just as likely as political development in many new nations. (Huntington, 1968) So an important task of an introductory class in comparative government is to show students how precarious the creation of effective political institutions can be. Using the Emergency as a case study is a good way to do that. This short paper outlines the key political concepts necessary to analyze political decay and provides an number of ways to "explain" the Indian Emergency, trying all the while to do justice to the complexity of the issue of political underdevelopment in terms a beginning student of comparative politics might understand.

Background to the Emergency

On June 26, 1975 Prime Minister Indira Gandhi declared a state of grave emergency to combat "internal disturbances." The presidential order suspended constitutional protection of freedom of press, assembly, and protection against unlawful detention. The arrests had begun already the night before and within the first three months about 50,000 persons, including many opposition members of Parliament as well as critical members of Indira's own Congress Party, were arrested and detained without trial. A typical item of conversation in New Delhi during that time was whether or not your phone was tapped.

Prior to the beginning of the crackdown, the opposition parties in the state of Gujarat were able to form a coalition and win an election over the Congress. The long dominate party was being effectively challenged. Simultaneously Indira Gandhi was indicted for election improprieties in the previous election and opposition leaders called for civil disobedience and her resignation. Strikes broke out throughout the country. Socialist leader J.P. Narayan's campaign against government corruption began to spread around the country from its origins in Narayan's home state of Bihar where agitation against corrupt officials had reached fever pitch.

Mrs. Gandhi argued that the Emergency was necessary medicine for a country nearing internal breakdown where duly elected officials were being forced out of government and the armed forces were being incited to mutiny. Although many observers do not "buy" Mrs. Gandhi's rationale for the draconian measures put in place initially and the subsequent revision of the Indian constitution to suit the needs of the Gandhi government (Kalhan, 1977; Thakur, 1980) it is important to provide background for students on the stresses faced by the Indian government since its inception. This is not to excuse Mrs. Gandhi's methods, but to provide the context for the situation of 1975. Understanding the Emergency requires that students be aware of the difficulties in consolidating a country split by religious, linguistic and caste differences and confronted as well by governance problems of the most severe kind. In other words, the Emergency (in India and elsewhere) has to do with the inability to solve basic core problems.

Core Problems for New Nations

The Indian Emergency as a case study should be prefaced with the discussion of four key problems which somehow need to be handled by developing countries (Andrain, 1970). The introduction of these important concepts early on and frequent reference back to them makes students aware that there are indeed even bigger and more fundamental problems which Third World countries face than drought or overpopulation or civil unrest.

India is a fine example of the crucial problem of forging a common identity. Common identity is usually fostered by the nationalist struggle, since there is nothing more effective in uniting a people than to have a common enemy. The Indian National Congress was the vehicle for unifying Indian factions in the face of British imperialism. But after the "common enemy" is eliminated, the process of getting a diversity of ethnic, religious, and linguistic groups to think of themselves as Indian rather than Hindus, or Bengalis is an incredibly difficult task. Ideologies or charismatic leaders help create common identity but simply may not be strong enough. (Heeger, 1974) Primordial ties and loyalties are essentially village and group loyalties; there is little or no loyalty to some abstract entity called "India." Common national identity is hardly felt amidst the multinational loyalties which are much stronger.

The problem of creating effective instruments of power is a second core problem students need to know about. The government has to have sufficient power or there can be no control of a country without common identity. The Third World consists of many governments which do not work because they do not have effective power. This is because political institutions are not neutral bureaucracies with standard operating procedure; they are in effect very fluid, highly unstable linkages between patrons and clients. (Heeger, 1974) Constitutions, regulations, in fact the whole public policy process has an aura of fiction about it. Legal statues and institutional policy can be easily ignored or manipulated by those with strong personal power. Corruption is the order of the day, resulting in poor implementation of public works projects. Taxes cannot be collected very well. Insurgencies cannot be stamped out. Foreign influence cannot be effectively fought off. There are too many problems to confront and crisis management becomes the only kind of management. But even crisis management has little impact when the government has little effective power--those closing the vicious circle of government impotence.

The failure of government to develop effective, institutional power means that it must use coercion to try to accomplish anything at all. Thus we come to a third core problem: the difficulty of developing governmental legitimacy. Legitimacy means that the authority of a government is accepted by those who run it and the population at large. In order for a government to be perceived as legitimate it must be perceived to be working effectively. Corrupt and coercive governments are not trusted by the population. Governments which cannot run the economy and provide economic development in the broader sense of growth as well as fair income distribution will not be trusted by the people. Thus this third core problem is tied into the second. Without effective power, governments cannot work well enough to attain legitimacy. Without legitimacy, governments can only rule through intimidation. Intimidation is only effective for so long before unrest and protest require greater application of coercion to maintain order.

The final, and by no means the least important, core problem is the fostering of economic development. Of course it is widely known that Third World countries face immense disadvantages due to the structure of the world economy itself. But putting this issue aside, students do need to understand that many Third World countries reveal intense internal conflict about the appropriate road to take in organizing the means of production and distribution of goods and services such that the minimal needs of the population can be met and some economic growth can be attained and jobs created for the immense numbers of young entrants to the work force.

India is a clear case where competing visions of economic development make any final solution to this fourth core problem more complicated. Nehru's plans for India contrast with Gandhi's. Nehru's India would be a modern, industrialized society with state-guided production to ensure equitable distribution of wealth. Gandhi and his followers envisioned an India that was rural, self-governing, and decentralized. While Gandhi was not to be able to fight for this kind of India, two important followers of Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave and Jayaprakash Narayan, would attempt to carry out his message and his program for grass-roots self reliance and simple technology. Narayan is one of the key actors in fomenting the activity which brought on the Emergency. The key thing to point out to students here is that we are talking about not only the inability of governments to bring out economic development (in the broader sense), but also fundamental disagreement about the type of "development" which should take place. Capitalism, socialist industrialism, and Gandhian social reconstruction are alternatives very much alive in India, compounding the whole horribly difficult problem of economic development in a land of 800 million people.

Structural Divergence and Political Fluidity

To see the Emergency as an outgrowth of failure to solve core problems is reasonable enough. A variation on this argument, using some of the same concepts, explains the Emergency as the result of a discernable "divergence" between economic and political developments in India. (Kahane, 1977) This view makes the argument that Indian political demands essentially outpace economic development. The lack of economic improvement results in declining legitimacy. At the same time the "overproduction" of educated elites and the development of highly factionalized mass politics places too much strain on political institutions. (Kahane, 1977; Huntington, 1965)

In this view the aim of the state of Emergency was to counter these tendencies by controlling political fluidity while simultaneously increasing economic development. Here students could be asked to come up with other examples from the Third World where regimes attempt to reduce political demands while essentially attempting to solve the core problem of economic development. Of course the major assumption here is that somehow

political "immaturity" and factionalism must be held at bay while some enlightened elite gets on with the process of economic development. The reduction of "political fluidity" might be attained by various means: the unification of opposition parties and factions, the establishment of a corporate state, or, as in the case of the Emergency, the imposition of central authoritarian control.

The Emergency as Class Dominance Assured

Not everyone would accept the theory that the Emergency was a desperate attempt to control the escalation of political participation. A Marxist view sees the Emergency as a continuation of the status quo favoring the alliance of the landed elite and the dominant corporate sector. (Blair, 1980) Through its "discipline" of the labor force and the protection given the ruling classes, the Emergency strips away the facade of parliamentary democracy leaving only the "underlying reality of elite class dominance." (Blair, 1980)

Personalized Rule and Political Decay

By this point, students are relatively well equipped conceptually to begin thinking about the Emergency. The "core problems" approach, the "divergence" perspective, as well as class analysis approach our central problem from different angles. The difficulties associated with attempting to come to grips with the four core problems might be, in themselves, enough to push governments in the direction of authoritarian rule. In most of the Third World this seems to be the case. The case might also be made for the suppression of mass politics in the interests of economic development which might create the foundation for legitimate political institutions. But, whose class interests might be served by such a narrowing of political participation?

The puzzle remains that India had enjoyed a functioning democracy for some time despite immense problems as a new nation: coping with the aftermath of the bloodbath of communal rioting during partition, the assassination of Mahatmas Gandhi, the resettlement of millions of refugees, the linguistic nightmare of drawing state boundaries. Evidently India was dealing with the four core problems and any political/economic "divergence" in reasonable enough fashion with Nehru and the Congress Party at the helm. No one seriously questioned Nehru's socialist credentials.

The argument could be made that the Emergency represents a form of political decay in that democratic procedures (evidently not sufficiently entrenched) could be so quickly set aside. The public was soon forced into submission. Institutions and intermediate agencies were neutralized--parliament, parties, the judiciary and the press. Indira could mould and transform the political system at will.

The difficulty inherent in this view is how then to explain why after two years of the Emergency the electorate voted Indira out. Wouldn't this reversal indicate that democratic norms had been sufficiently strong in India? (Klieman, 1981)

As it turns out, democratic sentiment in however great a quantity it may exist in a new nation, unfortunately, does not guarantee that the four core problems will be solved. The relationship between democracy and the fundamental problems described above is an interesting one to wrestle with and some students will regularly jump to the conclusion that countries facing such difficulties as India need authoritarian governments to deal with immense social problems. Others argue for democracy of some kind however badly it may be practiced.

At this point it is useful to introduce a few more concepts which should not be too difficult for the majority of students to understand. What most observers of the Indian political system have remarked is that efforts to institutionalize democratic procedures actually regress as Indira Gandhi begins the process of personalizing power after 1968. (Graves, 1976) Here it is important for students to get a feel for how political power is very much "personalized" throughout the Third World. The predominance of personal power means that institutions are essentially not given the opportunity to work. Institutional regulations and procedures give way to personal directives.

Personal power and deinstitutionalization go hand in hand. Although all institutions revealed their fragility during the Emergency, the institution most damaged by Mrs. Gandhi's personalization of power was the Congress Party. From 1947 to 1967 the "Congress system," a notion coined by Rajni Kothari, (Kothari, 1970) maintained stability and the effective channeling of demands to the Centre in Delhi. For decades the Congress was the only all-India party not only geographically but also in its ability to appeal to virtually all sectors of society. The base of Congress support was wide and deep.

This meant that opposition to the Congress did not provide a viable alternative but really acted as a pressure group which criticized from the outside. The Congress Party, itself factionalized, was sensitive to these demands and, in some cases, absorbed movements from the outside. The Congress was the voice of socialism to coopt the left. It was the voice of regionalism in the states to undercut separatism.

The process of political decay in India begins with the breakdown of this system of consensus. Soon after Mrs. Gandhi gains control after the 1967 election she splits the party and begins to centralize power in her own inner circle. Personal loyalty becomes the ticket to advancement in the party. Congress politics had become court politics and by 1975 government institutions are essentially impotent as Mrs. Gandhi rules the

national and state governments by decree. Even the Cabinet was not consulted about the Emergency. (Moraes, 1980)

The Emergency in this view grows out of personal power that no longer constrained by institutional controls. (Kalhan, 1977; Thakur, 1980)

Mrs. Gandhi's Case

Thus far we have looked at four possible explanations for the Emergency. The first postulates essentially that given the immense difficulties presented by inability to "solve" the four core problems, India, almost inevitably, would need authoritarian government of some kind to cope. A second theory looks more specifically at divergence in political and economic development as the crux of the problem. A third view employs the concepts of "personalized power" and "political decay" to argue that as the institutional structure of the Congress Party is weakened and then virtually destroyed it can no longer function as a legitimate mechanism for conflict resolution. Mrs. Gandhi becomes the center of the political universe. The fourth relies on class analysis to reveal the underlying class roots of what appears to be a personal attempt to maintain power by Mrs. Gandhi and her inner circle.

But it is possible that the Emergency and the conditions which brought it about were essentially unique events. And the end of the Emergency and the subsequent Congress defeat could be seen as well as a response to specific and extraordinary "excesses." This view implies that the Emergency was a temporary and necessary aberration in the history of Indian democracy rather than the outcome of more basic problems.

I think Mrs. Gandhi makes a good effort to argue her side. One way to hear her explanation that India needed some "strong medicine" to regain social order and to eliminate corruption is to view the film "Mrs. Gandhi's India" and let her make her own case. This film is mainly an extended interview with Mrs. Gandhi just after the imposition of emergency rule. She outlines the specific conditions (the railway strike, incitements to mutiny in the armed forces, the oil crisis) which led her to take forceful action. She also discusses her Twenty Point Program to reintroduce discipline and effect reform. (The film also shows some good historical footage which nicely reinforces any earlier lectures or discussions of postwar Indian history.)

As Mrs. Gandhi also explained in a Washington Post interview, the Emergency "was a shock treatment in a very special situation, which is not going to recur in history." In her view the strains of the Bangladesh war, the global financial crisis, and opposition efforts to paralyze the government made for a unique set of conditions. (Thakur, 1980)

India: A Wounded Civilization

Any case study of the Emergency might profitably discuss each of the five perspectives above. Clearly Mrs. Gandhi's view is the minority one. The others see deeper roots to the particular crisis of Mrs. Gandhi's India of 1975-77 and the ongoing crisis in the India now ruled by her eldest son.

One final position, however, should also be explored with students. V.S. Naipaul's work, India: A Wounded Civilization, digs even deeper into the roots of the Emergency and finds them in a stagnant and disintegrating traditional society. This work is a challenge for students, because sometimes Naipaul is more allusive than precise in his "explanation" for the Emergency. I supply the student with study questions for Naipaul's essay and devote an entire class period to discussing the ramifications of Naipaul's contentions.

Written during the Emergency, this work argues that the Emergency is much more than a political crisis; it is a crisis of the Indian spirit which clings to a Hinduism which only represents "vulnerability, defeat, and withdrawal." The Emergency is only the symptom of an India that is stalled, intellectually depleted, and beset by "moral chaos." He says at one point that "the crisis of India is not only political and economic. The larger crisis is of a wounded old civilization that has at last become aware of its inadequacies and is without the intellectual means to move ahead."

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